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Old PCs store new potential

E-BIZ

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When it comes to personal computers and technology, it may seem like the overriding goal of most small-business operators is to save money.

Many of us don't have the lavish technology budgets enjoyed by large corporations. Each purchase of a new computer system can be an agonizing process, as we weigh the potential benefits of upgrading to a faster machine against the drain upon cash flow.

That's why I'm convinced that many entrepreneurs can discover some healthy cost savings by learning how to find new capabilities in old technology.

Take that old 386 computer that you may have bought 10 years ago. The temptation is probably to throw it out. But I'm taking just such a machine, adding to it an "ancient" 14,400-baud modem that I had lying around, installing a network card and setting it up with an old version of Winfax software.

Presto! After a little bit of futzing, I'll have a machine that can automatically receive faxes and output them on my laser printer. The total investment was about $30 for the network card.

I already have a fax machine, a model from 1987 that I obtained in a barter deal back in 1991. Why bother setting up a separate system? The incentive is simple — the paper for my laser printer is far less expensive than the rolls of fax paper that I have to purchase for the other machine. Since I go through a box of four rolls every few months at a cost of $50 or so, I expect to save quite a bit of money, particularly given that I can choose which faxes I want to print.

By getting into the mindset that there is a lot of life left in old technology, you can discover many wonderful ways of saving money. Perhaps the best investment you can make is to become familiar with the local used computer store. Make that a part of your office equipment strategy.

I just purchased a 16-port Ethernet hub, a device that is used to link all the computers in my home office. New, it would have cost me several hundred dollars. I got it for $50, and it works like a charm. (The company that sold it to me resells all kinds of old technology from one of the country's largest computer rental organizations, so I feel comfortable that the equipment is reliable.)

Used equipment can take on a significant role in the small office, particularly as you network your equipment and become more involved with the Internet.

I suggest you hold on to that old 486 PC that you may have bought five years ago. Developments in the world of computing with what is known as Linux mean that these old "boat anchors" can take on an increasingly important and inexpensive role.

If you aren't familiar with Linux, you should be. It's part of a fascinating development in the world of computing known as "pen source" software." Millions of computer developers worldwide are creating world-class software, which they make available for free. The concept promises to be the most significant shakeup of computing since the Internet and a huge bonus to small business.

I've recently taken the first PC I purchased for my small business — a 486 PC that seemed destined for the trash heep — and installed the Linux operating system on it. The computer now operates as a server for part of my small business Web site. It is linked to the world through the cable modem connection in my home office. The cost for Linux is free — your only investment is the time in figuring out how to install it.

These are but a few examples of the magic to be found in old PCs. There are many entrepreneurs who have no doubt implemented other very innovative solutions with old technology. If so, I'd love to hear from you.

One thing to keep in mind is that to utilize old technology to its fullest, you must be prepared to be a bit more involved with technical issues than you might like.

But maybe not. You can usually find a 16-year-old kid in the neighborhood who can do a few tricks with old computers. Given their cash flow circumstances, quite a few of them have mastered the skill of doing a lot more with less.

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